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AUTHOR Drennon, Cassie
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ABSTRACT

In adult English-as-a-Second-Language literacy education and staff development, practitioner inquiry has emerged as a powerful approach toward improving practice. A variety of activities occur under the umbrella of practitioner inquiry, all of which are grounded in the knowledge and questions held by practitioners. The characteristics of inquiry intersect with those of other adult education concepts such as self-directed learning, reflective practice, learner centeredness, and action research. Inquiry has been defined as a "social and collaborative process" through which practitioners actually contribute new knowledge within programs and even to the larger adult education field. This digest examines the thinking that underlies practitioner inquiry, explains the phases of an inquiry process, and gives examples of projects. The digest concludes by identifying concerns with the approach and by suggesting changes that must take place if inquiry is to be viably implemented as a staff development process. (VWL) (Adjunct ERIC Clearinghouse on Literacy Education)

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National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education

Adult Literacy Practitioners as Researchers

By Cassie Drennon

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National Clearinghouse for ESL Literacy Education

Adult Literacy Practitioners as Researchers

by Cassie Drennon
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA

In adult English as a second language (ESL) literacy education and staff development, practitioner inquiry has emerged as a powerful approach toward improving practice. A variety of activities occurs under the umbrella of practitioner inquiry, all of which are grounded in the knowledge and questions held by practitioners (Fingeret and Cockley, 1992). Its characteristics intersect with those of other adult education concepts such as self-directed learning, reflective practice, learner-centeredness, and action research. Lytle, Belzer, and Reumann (1992, p.16) define inquiry as a "social and collaborative process" through which practitioners actually contribute new knowledge within programs and even to the larger adult education field.

This digest examines thinking that underlies practitioner inquiry, explains the phases of an inquiry process, and gives examples of projects. It concludes by identifying concerns with the approach and by suggesting changes that must take place if inquiry is to be viably implemented as a staff development process.

Some Underlying Assumptions

Having traveled a long, circuitous path through the social sciences and K-12 education (see Holly, 1991 for an historical overview), practitioner inquiry has arrived relatively recently on the adult basic education (ABE) and ESL scenes. Proponents of practitioner inquiry in all fields of education tend to share the following views:

- The knowledge transmission model of staff development is insufficient. Although traditional workshops expose participants to new ideas and may renew enthusiasm for teaching, "there is little evidence that this approach works well and more reason to believe that it seldom leads to noticeable improvement or change in professional practice" (Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993, p. 33).
- Staff development should be consistent with what we know from cognitive science (Fingeret & Cockley, 1992); "Knowledge is useful only in so far as it enables persons to make sense of experience. It is gained from the *inside*" (Berlak & Berlak, 1981, cited in Osterman & Kottkamp, 1993, p.37).
- The voices of practitioners have been largely absent from the field of adult literacy education research, yet practitioners are uniquely positioned to provide an inside view of practice in adult literacy education (Lytle, Belzer, & Reumann, 1993).

The Process of Inquiry

A first step for those interested in inquiry might be to link with or establish a network among colleagues who share this vision. Inquiry can occur collaboratively between university and field practitioners or between practitioners and students. The participants in an inquiry project engage in the following activities:

- ***Reflecting*** on practice and identifying a problem, issue, question, or concern;
- ***Gathering*** information through observation; study groups; interviews; study of records, including student work; test scores; lesson plans; case studies; video and audio recordings of classroom life; professional reading; workshops and conferences;
- ***Studying*** the information gathered — analyzing, interpreting or critiquing the information;
- ***Planning*** some action to be taken such as a new approach, strategy, or other intervention;
- ***Implementing*** the action plan;
- ***Monitoring and evaluating*** the changes that occur and judging the quality of the changes; and
- ***Sharing*** what has been learned through informal sessions with colleagues, facilitating workshops, or writing and publishing.

The process described here is action-oriented; that is, it is expected that some changes will be implemented as a result of the reflection and study. However, inquiry can occur without initiating specific changes; rather, it might involve examining present circumstances, exploring ideas, or developing one's own theory. Lytle, Belzer, and Reumann (1993) add that practitioner inquiry is not field-testing the ideas of others, nor is it simply implementing a new strategy that one is already convinced will work. Instead it is a process of generating ideas through reflection and examination of practice, and exploring the implications of those ideas within the practitioner's setting. Cockley (1993) provides a useful resource for practitioners interested in starting an inquiry project.

Practitioner Inquiry in Action

A number of practitioner inquiry communities are developing around the nation. For example, Virginia adopted an inquiry-based staff development system for adult educators in 1993. Throughout the state, groups of practitioners develop inquiry projects with the guidance of locally trained staff development facilitators. The Virginia Adult Educators' Research Network promotes and supports inquiry by organizing study groups; by training practitioners to review literature, conduct interviews, or analyze data; and by publishing practitioner research reports. Hundreds of practitioners in Virginia are exploring a broad range of questions such as "What are the factors that contribute to social bonding among ESL students, and what is the relationship between social bonding and student retention?" and "What happens when I use dialogue journals with inmates in my detention center literacy class?"

In Rhode Island, a group of ESL teachers were dissatisfied with tests available to measure learner progress. They initiated an action research process to address, among other things, ways to help learners see their own gains in literacy (Isserlis, 1990). Their

research efforts resulted in the development of an evaluation grid through which learning and change can be meaningfully gauged.

In Philadelphia, practitioners from a number of adult literacy agencies are participating in the Adult Literacy Practitioner Inquiry Project (ALPIP). As a field/university community of practitioner-researchers, the group's purpose is to simultaneously implement and investigate inquiry-based staff development (Lytle, Belzer, & Reumann, 1993). During biweekly seminars teachers, volunteers, and administrators discuss adult literacy education research as it relates to their own inquiry projects. Some research questions being pursued through the ALPIP project are, "What happens when I facilitate collaborative writing workshops in my classroom?" and "What happens when I use African American literature rather than life skills or job-related reading materials to teach various concepts?"

Challenges to Inquiry

A number of practical concerns have been cited by practitioners implementing inquiry-based approaches. They include:

Time — Although we speak of inquiry as an activity embedded in, rather than added on to practice, many claim that time must be built into practitioners' schedules if they are to engage in reflection, meet with colleagues, study the literature and research of the field, analyze data, and document classroom activity.

Trust — Historically, teaching has been conducted largely in private. If practitioners are to be expected to make public the problematic aspects of their work lives, the culture of the education programs must change to invite greater levels of trust among teachers and between teachers and administrators.

Support — If inquiry is to inspire program-level innovation, support for the process and its outcomes must be clearly articulated and sustained by program administrators. Support includes not only exhibiting genuine interest and providing ongoing encouragement, but also being willing to adopt new ideas.

Expectations — Some practitioners enter into the inquiry process with great expectations for bringing about significant, often long-awaited changes only to find that policies in the larger system constrain particular innovations. (Testing and assessment is one such area.) If practitioner inquiry does not provide an impetus for policy-level changes, it may serve to further discourage some already disenfranchised workers.

The Promise of Practitioner Inquiry

Practitioner inquiry has significant positive benefits that make it worthwhile to take on the challenges it poses. For example, Goswami and Stillman (1987) describe what happens to teachers when they conduct research:

- Their teaching is transformed in important ways: They become theorists—articulating their intentions, testing their assumptions, and connecting theory with practice.
- They increase their use of resources, form networks, and become more active professionally.
- They become rich resources for the profession by providing information not previously available.
- They become critical, responsive readers and users of current research, less apt to accept uncritically others' theories, less vulnerable to fads, and more authoritative in their assessment of curricula, methods, and materials.
- They collaborate with their students to answer questions important to both teachers and students, drawing on community resources in new and unexpected ways.

Practitioner inquiry does not replace traditional staff development methods. However, it requires participants to interact in nontraditional ways with knowledge, resources, colleagues and programs (Drennon, 1993). Fitting inquiry into *existing* staff development structures is problematic. Educational work environments will have to be redesigned to accommodate the kinds of collaboration and collegiality that an inquiry approach demands. Further, the culture of the education workplace must adopt a stance that legitimizes practitioners as both researchers *and* reformers. In short, successful implementation within systems requires commitment on the part of all stakeholders to a set of values and beliefs honoring the vitality of practitioners as knowledge makers within the system.

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